

Free clinics are nonprofit organizations that use volunteer health professionals to provide free or low cost health care to uninsured persons. Across the state there are 50 clinics that have joined together to form the Free Clinics of Michigan. These clinics are sponsored by churches, or hospitals or their local communities. Many of them have sprung up in the last ten years to serve the increasing numbers of uninsured persons who do not have access to health care. The uninsured who come to us for care, for the most part, have chronic diseases but they cannot afford the medicine and monitoring they need to stay alive and healthy and out of the ER. Most are employed, but in low wage jobs that provide no benefits.

It is a myth that poor people can get Medicaid—or that uninsured people can always go to the ER for care. If you are an insulin-dependent diabetic, but you can't afford to buy insulin, you will end up in the ER. There they will stabilize you and send you out the door with a bill and a prescription for insulin. Tomorrow you are in the same boat—and it is sinking. You do not get primary care in the ER.

Some legislators might think that the answer to the problem is to give everyone an insurance card. The problem with that solution is that you have to find a doctor who will accept the card. The number (and quality) of physicians who will accept Medicaid is grossly inadequate to the need. This will most certainly worsen if Medicaid reimbursement is cut another 6%. If a poor patient has a Medicaid spend-down, in effect, he is uninsured except for hospitalization. At most free clinics we consider patients on Medicaid spend-down to be uninsured.

It is criminal that in the richest country in the world we allow the poor and vulnerable among us to go without care and to die unnecessarily. I hope that each of you knows the free clinic in your district. I invite you to spend some time in their waiting room. Recently Rep. Steve Tobocman sat in the Cabrini Clinic waiting room and heard from our patients what it is like to be poor, and sick, and uninsured in the city of Detroit. It was quite an education for him!

I challenge you to turn Rep. Vagnozzi's resolution into action. It will take more than an insurance card. It will take a commitment from each of you to do something about the health care crisis in Michigan.

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